DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 928 RC 015 711

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TITLE Effects of a Wilderness Program on Self-Esteem and Locus of Control Orientations of Young Adults. Summary of Thesis.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Canadian Conference on the Application of Curriculum Research (6th, Winnepeg, Manitoba, Canada, November 26-27, 1981).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; *Delinquency; Delinquent Rehabilitation; Discovery Learning; Experiential Learning; *Locus of Control; *Outdoor Education; Personality Change; Self Concept; *Self Esteem; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Youth
IDENTIFIERS *Outward Bound; Wilderness Education Programs

ABSTRACT

Quantitative data and descriptive data (written self-evaluation and journal entries) were collected from young adults participating in a standard 26-day Outward Bound course during a quasi-experimental control group design experiment to determine the degree to which participation in a high risk wilderness program leads to self-discovery, associated with changes such as increased feelings of self-worth and self-reliance. Results showed significant increases in self-esteem and self-assertion for male and female participants. Females decreased in their belief that events were controlled by powerful others and chance, while males increased in internal locus of control orientations. Results lead to the conclusion that the structured wilderness experience provides an important medium for enhancing the personal development of young adults. Descriptive results revealed components of the process of change associated with participation in a wilderness program. Changes in self-esteem and personal control were attributed to successful accomplishment of difficult activities, supportive group environment and intense personal interactions, wilderness environment, and increased self-awareness which included recognition of both strengths and weaknesses leading to a more realistic self-image. (NEC)

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SUMMARY
of
Thesis: Effects of a Wilderness Program on Self-Esteem and Locus of Control Orientations of Young Adults.

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Prepared for:

Sixth Annual Canadian Conference on
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RC 015 711

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I initially undertook this study of wilderness programs and personality change as a result of five years previous work experience with a residential high risk wilderness program. As an instructor/counsellor with a wilderness program for juvenile delinquents, I observed substantial changes in the personalities and functioning of the participants. An example of a dramatic piece of evidence attesting to the value of wilderness programs was given to me by a 15 year old girl from one of the courses. The following is an excerpt from her journal written near the end of a wilderness experience.

> I think my view of myself has changed a great deal in this last month. I feel like a person whereas before I thought of myself as a piece of shit, and everything I did was rotten. I also feel that I'm just as good as the next guy. I think I didn't change until the last trail we did when we met Brian. Before that I was so down on myself that anything I did I would say to myself - you did it so what big deal - but on the last trail we did when I got to the bottom I felt so good about myself that I thought I was going to cry and that was the first time in my entire 15 years that I have felt good about myself or about what I did.

Growth of the participants seemed primarily related to the personality variables of self-esteem and personal control. Therefore, from the perspective of personality development during young adulthood, I chose to examine the effects of a high risk wilderness program upon the levels of self-esteem and locus of control orientations of the participants.

Young adult hood is generally a time when adolescents attempt to become independent of their parents and assume more responsibility for

themselves. Positive psychological adjustment during this time involves the development of self-reliance and a stable and positive self-image. The shift from dependence on others to dependence on the self is developed and formalized in some cultures by experiences called "rites de passage". These experiences are usually demanding situations where the individual develops a feeling of self-confidence and self-worth through reliance upon one's own actions. In our society, formalized "rites de passage" do not exist. However, a similar kind of experience is available to young adults through Outward Bound and related wilderness programs.

What is a high risk wilderness program?

A high risk wilderness program provides participants with a 21-26 day wilderness experience which consists of high-risk, stressful activities such as rock climbing, rappelling, mountain rescue, backpacking, kayaking, canoeing, river crossing, first aid, orienteering, and a three day solo experience. Activities are presented in varying and increasing grades of difficulty and are designed so that each individual may successfully challenge them, continually pushing themselves to their own limits. These wilderness activities are used as a vehicle for personal growth. Actual skill acquisition, though important, is secondary.

The activities which make up a high-risk wilderness program vary according to location, season, and populations. However, all activities used within a wilderness program, which is designed to promote personal growth of participants, are drawn from the principles of the Outward Bound

process. According to the Canadian Outward Bound Mountain School staff manual (1980),

> Outward Bound is an educational process dedicated to the principle that the individual develops self-confidence, concern for others, and self-awareness . . . when confronted by challenging, shared experiences . . . based on adventure in the natural environment and through a learning process based on self-discovery and small group interactions.

The Outward Bound process may be defined conceptually as a series of characteristic problem-solving tasks set in a unique physical and social environment, which creates a state of adaptive dissonance in the learner. The learner adapts to the dissonance by mastery of himself and his environment which reorganizes the meaning and direction of the learner's experience. This process is described more fully in the flow chart presented in Figure 1. Walsh and Golins (1976) identify the basic elements of the Outward Bound process as the prescribed physical and social Outward Bound environments, the characteristic Outward Bound problem-solving tasks, the instructor, and the interaction of the learner with all of these.

Design and Implementation of Study

To determine the degree to which participation in a high risk wilderness program leads to self-discovery, associated with changes such as increased feelings of self-worth and self-reliance, I used a quasi-experimental control group design to collect quantitative data from young adults participating in a standard 26-day Outward Bound course. Data

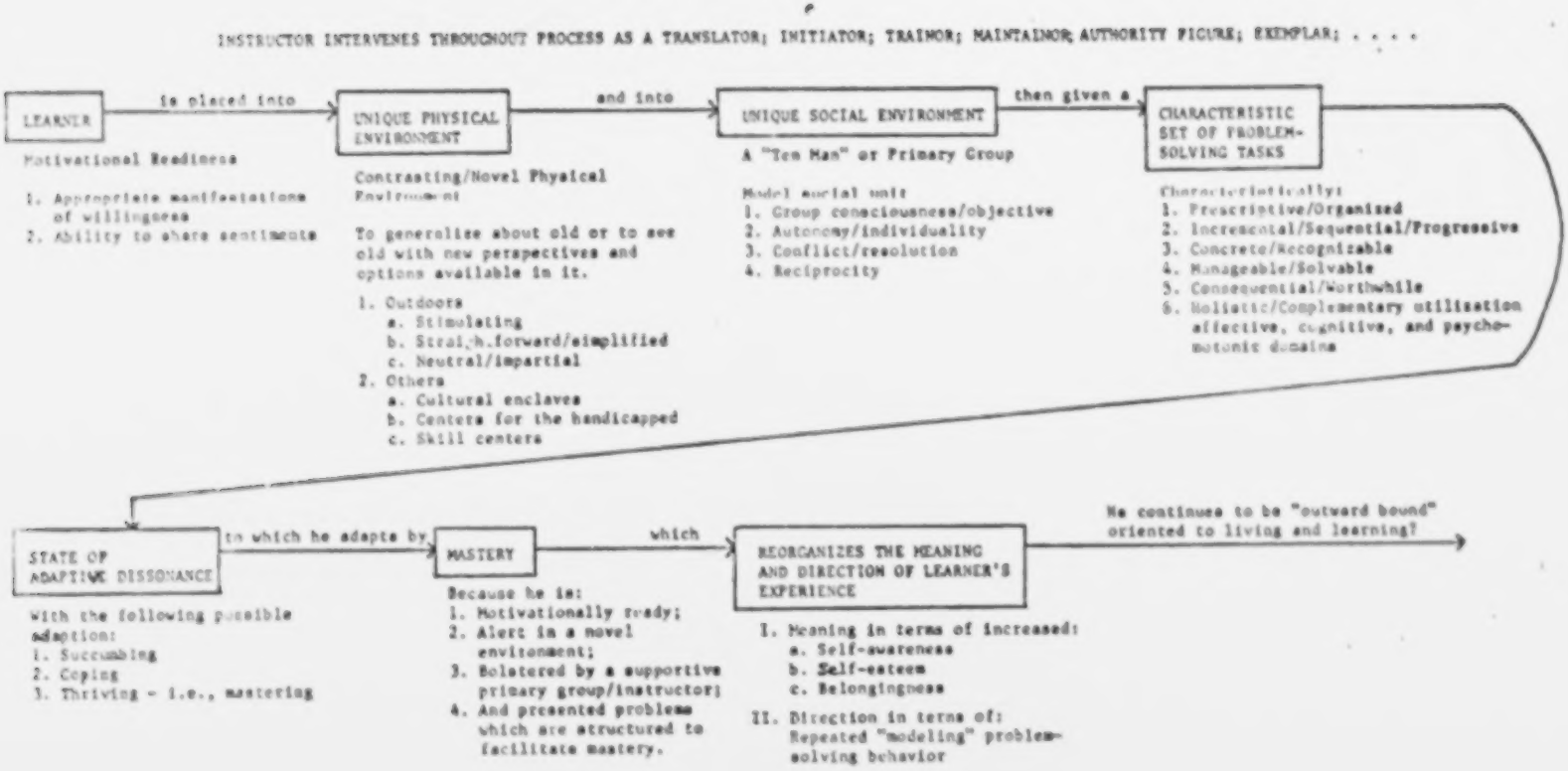
INSTRUCTOR INTERVENES THROUGHOUT PROCESS AS A TRANSLATOR; INITIATOR; TRAINOR; MAINTAINOR; AUTHORITY FIGURE; EXEMPLAR; . . . .
LEARNER
is placed into
UNIQUE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
and into
UNIQUE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
then given a
CHARACTERISTIC SET OF PROBLEM-SOLVING TASKS
Motivational Readiness
1. Appropriate manifestations of willingness
2. Ability to share sentiments
Contrasting/Novel Physical Environment
To generalize about old or to see old with new perspectives and options available in it.
1. Outdoors
a. Stimulating
b. Straightforward/simplified
c. Neutral/impartial
2. Others
a. Cultural enclaves
b. Centers for the handicapped
c. Skill centers
A "Ten Man" or Primary Group
Model social unit
1. Group consciousness/objective
2. Autonomy/individuality
3. Conflict/resolution
4. Reciprocity
Characteristically:
1. Prescriptive/Organized
2. Incremental/Sequential/Progressive
3. Concrete/Recognizable
4. Manageable/Solvable
5. Consequential/Worthwhile
6. Holistic/Complementary utilization affective, cognitive, and psychomotonic domains
STATE OF ADAPTIVE DISSONANCE
to which he adapts by
MASTERY
which
REORGANIZES THE MEANING AND DIRECTION OF LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE
He continues to be "outward bound" oriented to living and learning?
With the following possible adaption:
1. Succumbing
2. Coping
3. Thriving - i.e., mastering
Because he is:
1. Motivationally ready;
2. Alert in a novel environment;
3. Bolstered by a supportive primary group/instructor;
4. And presented problems which are structured to facilitate mastery.
I. Meaning in terms of increased:
a. Self-awareness
b. Self-esteem
c. Belongingness
II. Direction in terms of:
Repeated "modeling" problem-solving behavior

Figure 1. The Outward Bound Process

Note: From "The Exploration of the Outward Bound Process" by W. Walsh and G. Golins. Denver: Colorado Outward Bound Publications, 1976.

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were collected for two variables, self-esteem and locus of control orientations, using valid and reliable pencil and paper measures. Hypotheses were statistically tested using single classification analysis of covariance.

In order to better investigate the process of change associated with participation in a wilderness program, I also collected descriptive data. To do this, I worked as an assistant with the program and, by assuming an active role in the Outward Bound process, insured the continuity of the experience for the participants. Two types of descriptive data were collected: written self evaluations and journal entries, and individual taped interviews. Using these observations and evaluations made by participants about subjectively experienced changes relating to their involvement in a wilderness program I was able to supplement the conclusions drawn from statistical treatment of quantitative data. More importantly, the descriptive data also allowed me to look at the importance of various components of the Outward Bound program.

Results and Conclusions

Results based on comparison with control group subjects showed significant increases in self-esteem for male and female participants. Differential effects of the wilderness program on changes in locus of control orientations were found depending upon sex. Females and males increased significantly in self-assertion. However, females decreased in perceptions that events were controlled by powerful others and chance.

while males increased in internal locus of control orientations. Analysis of qualitative data supported these findings. Students felt more able to exert control over their lives, while developing a realistic recognition of their personal limits. Students also experienced increased self-awareness, leading to a higher but realistic feeling of self-worth.

Results from this study lead to the conclusion that the structured wilderness experience provides an important medium for enhancing the personal development of young adults.

Specifically, findings consistently demonstrated that positive changes in the self-esteem and locus of control dimensions of personality are related to the kind of experience provided by a high-risk wilderness program for both males and females. In particular, participants experienced increased, but not inflated, feelings of self-worth after the Outward Bound program. This is a desirable outcome as realistic levels of self-esteem are associated with positive development. Also, the wilderness experience encouraged a moderate belief in generalized expectancies of personal control while contributing to a large increase in students' attitudes regarding the possibility of exerting control over their lives. Since students increased in their desire to try to effect changes in themselves and their environment but also retained realistic notions of their ability to succeed in all situations, it may be concluded that they will be better able to cope with the stresses and environmental constraints of daily living.

The descriptive results revealed components of the process of change associated with participation in a wilderness program. Changes in self-

esteem and personal control were primarily attributed to: (a) the successful accomplishment of difficult, challenging activities; (b) the supportive group environment and intense personal interactions; (c) the wilderness environment which, as one student stated, "draws honesty out of you. . . you can't sit there and lie to yourself when you're sitting with everything that's so bare and open to you"; and (d) increased self-awareness which included recognition of both strengths and weaknesses leading to a more realistic self-image. These connections which emerged from students' descriptions of the impact of the wilderness program upon themselves concur with those previously identified in examinations of the 'Outward Bound' process by Walsh and Golins (1976).

Implications

The importance of "rites de passage" during the transition from adolescence into adulthood and the relative absence of any such experience in our culture has been reported by many psychologists and sociologists. Participants' experiences during a high-risk wilderness program in many ways parallel experiences during "rites de passage". Confronted with risk and challenge, the individual is given the opportunity to grow and change. This opportunity is invaluable if it contributes to personal growth associated with increased ability to cope and adjust to the demands placed upon the adult by life in our complex society. The results of this study clearly imply that personal growth of this nature is related to participation in an intensive wilderness course. As such, the importance of

this kind of experience should not be neglected by fields such as counselling and public education which have traditionally been concerned with the enhancement of personal development.

Recommended Reading

Gibbons, M. Walkabout: Searching for the right passage from childhood and school. Phi Delta Kappan, May 1974, 596-602.

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